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INFO RUCNCCAN/ALL CANADIAN POSTS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER'S RESIGNATION A BLOW TO GOVERNMENT BUT NOT FATAL

REF: OTTAWA 703

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reason 1.4 (d)

**¶1.** (U) Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier on May 26 submitted his resignation as minister, effective immediately, to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who accepted it and appointed Minister of International Trade David Emerson to the additional post "on an interim basis." In his letter, Bernier admitted that he had left classified documents (which the media identified as briefing materials for the NATO meetings in April) "at a private residence." PM Harper's statement confirmed that the PM had only learned of this security breach late in the afternoon on May 26, that the government had regained the materials, and that Bernier "deeply regrets this error." Bernier remains a member of Parliament, albeit now a backbencher.

**¶2.** (SBU) The opposition had a field day with these sudden developments on May 27, with Liberal Foreign Affairs Critic Bob Rae calling the government's handling of the affair "Amateur Hour on Rideau." In the absence of Prime Minister Harper (on official travels in Europe), Government House Leader Peter Van Loan insisted that the Prime Minister had acted swiftly once he learned of the security breach, but continued to decline to discuss Bernier's private life or Bernier's former girlfriend's alleged links with organized crime.

**¶3.** (C) Comment: Opposition members had been gunning at Bernier for months, claiming that a series of diplomatic gaffes had hurt Canada's international image and reflected a lack of substantive background for the job, as well as the more recent charges about his private life. It was all the more embarrassing for the government just days after a Privy Council investigation (reftel) had highlighted sloppy handling of sensitive materials by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, with the Prime Minister acknowledging that DFAIT needed to do a better job on this front. There had long been speculation that the Prime Minister would reshuffle his cabinet over the summer Parliamentary recess, with Bernier likely to receive a demotion. The Conservatives were clearly caught off guard by the latest revelation by Bernier's former girlfriend that the classified documents remained in her apartment for about five weeks, and will likely be even more ready than ever to call an summer recess in early June. The Prime Minister will clearly need to take pains to come up with a distinguished successor to Bernier and perhaps this time forgo the image of "young blood" that both Bernier and his predecessor Peter MacKay had exemplified. Emerson in the meantime is a good choice, but his now-triple hatting (in addition to International Trade, he also serves as Minister of the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics) leaves the distinct impression at least among Ottawa politicos that the Conservative Cabinet is already thinly stretched. Bernier's sudden resignation was a blow to the Conservative "brand" and the Conservatives will be temporarily more on the defensive, but they will rebound -- although Bernier's own

political future is very much in doubt.

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